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## Elevation

*Denis Linehan*

### I.

From the very beginning the Elysian was devoted to the sky. Here was a skyscraper that announced it would alter the skyline, and become a new tower for seeing the city. Built at a cost of €150 million, the Elysian was conceived as a large, mixed use residential and retail development on Eglinton Street, located in the civic heart of the city and on the edge of its neglected docklands. The building originally aimed to supply 212 apartments, five retail outlets, seven offices and spaces for a gym and crèche. The contours of the Elysian's journey through the boom and bust of the Celtic Tiger are well known. It was granted planning permission in July 2005. It rose at a time of great optimism. It was completed in the middle of 2008 at the precipice of the economic crash. In the years that followed, it remained largely unoccupied. Its appeal to the city of Cork, as a beacon of confidence faded. To some it became a void in the sky. It's vacancy for some, is a symbol of shame, particularly as the intimate strains of a rental crisis and homelessness stalk the city.

Yet, unlike several other high-rise buildings raised in Ireland around the same time, the Elysian's completion saved it from ruination. The great grey concrete hulk of the abandoned headquarters of the Anglo Irish Bank in the Dublin docklands, or the long unfinished apartment blocks in Sandycove in South Dublin—over which were thrown huge weather proof canvases depicting fictional residents sunning themselves on balconies as a means to disguise the raw concrete shell underneath—ensured that high-rise ruins became potent symbols of the economic crash. The events that overtook the Elysian and buckled its image as a site for luxury living are ongoing. Shifts in the meanings around buildings are not unexpected, either about this particular tower, or those found elsewhere. Despite its mass, architecture is a volatile object. It is fabricated in culture and is often an expression of long held needs and desires. Its presences in places or on the horizon can express deep wishes or nourish disappointment. It can gather up indefinite but recognizable sentiments, which can resolve a city's questions over its identity or conversely be magnetized to diverging world views and thrown into conflict with long-standing ways of valuing the city.

Without eliding these issues completely, in this essay I want to focus upon rich legacies related to culture, the sky and space at work in Cork that have shaped the form of the Elysian and its intercessions in the public imagination. In certain places—and Cork is one of those places—the cultural relationships found in architecture's relationship to its site, its topographical situation and its modifications of both the sky and skyline acquire significant power and significance. The potency of these conditions—the power of *genius loci*—demand careful observation (Norberg-Schulz). An examination of the contexts, decisions and aspirations of the tower even before the 2008 crash overtook it, reveal how these forces folded the tower into the landscape and into fields of meaning far subtler than the narratives about luxury living offered in its marketing. In taking its position against the sky, the Elysian took its place in a very distinctive culture of sight and elevation, and the intense cultural geographies of prospects, sights and memory that it disturbed.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold reminds us that from the earliest times, there has been a knotting together of earth and sky. High places, mounds and elevations have been invested with meaning and drama (Ingold, 2007). Drawing upon Heidegger, he notes that there is 'no life, in short, in a world where earth and sky do not mix and mingle' (Ingold, 2010). The skyline is an involved and entangled thing. Not only is it entwined with the landscape, architecture, infrastructure and light but it also encompasses all the aspirations, politics and hopes in between. The skyline is a great meeting place, bringing disparate elements together in lines of sight, prospects, views and panoramas, whose ownership is never entirely fixed. It is observed, contemplated and pictured—in glances, meditations, in photographs, sketches and poetry—making the skyline of the city one of its largest and most intricate public spaces. And also perhaps its most auratic, offering what Walter Benjamin perceived as '...a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance' and its intercession with particular moments of contemplation and affect. The skyline is also both the most fleeting and greatest sign of a city's deep culture—an observation taken up by Michael Sorkin when he proclaims that the skyline of New York has been constructed '... in the image of

a bar graph' (Sorkin, 22). Lingering on the eye, the skyline blends the intimate geographies of memory and place, with investment, branding, capital, planning, architecture and design. The world over, when they happen, debates about high-rise towers reveal elaborate and persistent questions about the sky, light, prospects and views which speak to engrained questions of culture, habitat, vision and identity, of what is profitable, what is sustainable and what is just. This sky-culture reveals that in spite of their hardness, cities are unfixed and porous urban spaces, which sparkle with possibilities and are experienced and shaped within the intersections of every human and natural thing. Sensitivity to the Elysian's location in this culture, yields insights into its production and its reception. Ultimately it might explain why the building—which in a larger city might offer a notable contribution to a district and then blend silently into the background—may be of lasting significance.

## II.

As it rose, the Elysian seemed to manifest the regeneration potential of this area of the city, built originally to support port and manufacturing activities. In the years leading up to its construction, the Cork Area Strategic Plan (CASP) set out a framework for the regeneration of the Cork Docklands that drew upon models of waterfront development internationally. These propositions were rapidly taken up by commercial and political interests in the city who saw in this district possibilities for new office space, luxury apartments, spa hotels, concert venues and thousands of new housing units. This buoyancy about the future was reflected in the scheme prepared by Urban Design Consultants, who recast the docklands as a sequence of new neighbourhoods with an interconnected hierarchy of streets, laneways, squares and pocket parks linked to a wide riverside promenade and a new canal system. Both the Cork Dockland Strategy and the construction of the Elysian captured the optimistic mood of these pre-crash times. Proposed as a 'landmark building,' the tower was situated at the end of the main road to the city from Cork Airport where it could claim a gateway position. It was raised during a sustained period of urban development in which up to ten towers were proposed across Cork. Scott Tallon Walker Architects in their scheme for the Cork South Docklands—known as the Atlantic Quarter—imagined a 'new waterside skyline ... an attractive composition of office, hotel and residential buildings and a major new cultural and event destination in the form of the Cork Arena combining gallery, performance, and conference and exhibition space.'<sup>1</sup> Presented with these potential changes to the city, local newspapers evoked images of Manhattan, speculative skylines fueled by proposals for towers in the surrounding area, at Centre Park Road, Kennedy Road and The South Docks Quayside.

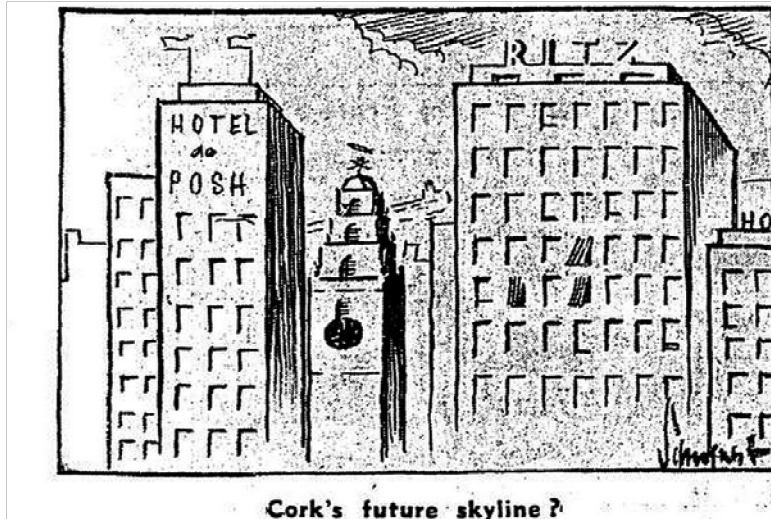
These proposals in Cork, reflected broader developments in Ireland, where at the beginning of the millennium it came about that the skyline became an increasingly important but also anxious space. In spite of the demolition of the first Irish tower-blocks built in Ireland in Ballymun at this time, and the complex failures this invoked, proposals for high-rise buildings was characteristic of urban development across Ireland. This was a time of landmarks, a fashion for statement buildings that haunts the architecture from this period, whose apartment complexes in particular spawned in their wake a whole new range of social problems and modes of living (Boyd). Two towers were finished in Limerick: the Riverpoint Tower and Clarion Hotel. There were dramatic proposals for Waterford and dozens of new towers were planned in Dublin, most along the quays and the Dublin Docklands, the most famous being the unbuilt U2 tower which had it been constructed would have housed a penthouse recording studio, with panoramic views over the city to the talismanic Sugarloaf mountain in Wicklow.

Skyscrapers offer opportunity for growth, but sit uncomfortably with the historical city, and often come into conflict with the intangible rights and amenity values to views and prospects that can be claimed by the population. In 2004, groups protesting the development of a large hotel and apartment complex at Western Road in Cork that would block cherished views of William Burgess's gothic cathedral, pictured the town overtaken by tower-blocks, and invoked the comic book heroes Batman and Robin casting incredulous misgivings about the developments in the skyline.



*'Kork City, 2015', reproduced with kind permission of Brendan Cotter and Café Paradiso.*

Such anxieties run deep. In the early 1960s, as plans for the 17storey County Hall designed by Patrick McSweeney went into circulation, the cartoonist for the *Cork Examiner* pictured the 18<sup>th</sup> century icon of Cork, St Anne's Shandon being overtaken by tower blocks, including a new glitzy Ritz Hotel.



*'Cork's Future Skyline' The Cork Examiner, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1962, reproduced with the kind permission of the Irish Examiner.*

As new urban development began to peak during 2004, one letter writer in the *Irish Independent* pleaded with the people of Cork '... to open their eyes to the reality of the virtual destruction of our beautiful city. This destruction is the result of the greed of the so-called developers in our midst who can do as they wish without any apparent resistance from City Hall. When standing outside the main entrance to City Hall and looking across the river Lee it beggars belief that planning has been granted for the existing concrete mountains which were built right in the heart of the city' (Martin). In fact, the pace of new development prompted the City Council to develop a series of planning strategies which included a skyline policy, a landscape policy and a tall buildings policy. These reveal deep sensitivities to topography and culture that the Elysian's production and reception cannot escape. The tower was held in their orbit, circumscribed by their calculations, expectations and deep wishes.

III.

Topography is culture. David Leatherbarrow notes that '... topography incorporates terrain, built and unbuilt, but more than that, for it also includes practical affairs, or their traces, ranging from those that are typical to those that are extraordinary' (Leatherbarrow, 12). The topography of Cork city is defined within a definable landscape setting and offers what urban planners refer to as a distinctive visual envelope—a zone of uninterrupted views that creates distinguishable boundaries and helps makes the city legible. The

contours and significance of this landscape has been recognised in topographies of the city for hundreds of years. Cork, its river, its harbour and its splendid view for one 19<sup>th</sup> century visitor ‘will suggest numerous subjects for the pencil of the artist of landscape painting.’ In 1944, the geographer Charles O Connell defined these ridges on the north as the Gurranebraher-Montenotte ridge and on the south as the Lehenagh ridge (O Connell 100-5). These ridges provide the backdrop to the city and are visible from multiple points. The City Council is clear that these views both of these elevations and the views from them provide amenity value—riches—to the population based generally upon their pleasantness, aesthetic coherence and cultural and recreational attributes. From a range of vantage points throughout the city, views of historical buildings, notably Saint Anne’s Church in Shandon, St Finbarr’s Cathedral, Holy Trinity Church and Blackrock Castle, have received special protection. These interventions formalize deeper social and cultural concerns about the skyline and its meaning.

While all of these are technical documents, they are driven by cultural and aesthetic values that have evolved over long periods of time. These texts must be read obliquely, to reveal and diffuse the cyphers they deploy to excise the communal and ambiguous urban mythology about the urban ecumene exercised but also evaded in the visible world. Sometimes, these categories cannot be gripped, only indicated with hesitant gestures. Within them, the skyline is conjured up, comes into focus, becoming a sequence of lines which planners and developers are obliged to conserve, edit and create as they consider new landmarks and buildings. The phrase currently running through these policy documents is to ‘conserve and enhance,’ a delicate axiom with specific outcomes for how the fabric of the city is to be shaped. The City Council is busy editing and conserving this skyline, encouraging designs that act upon the roofscape of new buildings and guiding architects to modify the scale, materials and style of their building to address the existing cityscape and the place of landmark buildings and views. The city skyline they say ‘... is a combination of elements: the general scale of buildings, streets and spaces from area to area, major landmarks on the skyline, other individual higher buildings, higher building groups and landscape elements’ (Cork City Council, 240). Significantly, a key proposition underwriting these schemes is that the new structures should never break the silhouette provided by the city’s ridges. The claim of the topographical is indelible, a claim found in the form and language of the Elysian.

The history of Cork is also a history of elevation. While the very name Cork, derived from the Gaelic word Corcaigh, interlaces its origins with the marsh upon which it was founded, it must be recalled that two towers dominate the city’s coat of arms. In 1846, a landmark tower was raised by public subscription in honour of the social reformer Father Mathew in Glountane in the eastern districts beyond the city. This landmark, through its form and clear sightlines, visibly relates to another tower at Blackrock, a point at which over hundreds of years the Lord Mayors cast a dart into the river to mark the city’s boundaries. In the 1860’s Callahan’s tower was constructed off Barrack Street in the southern districts of the inner city. The tower became a site for flamboyance and carnival, sex and drama (Keohane). The sky occupies almost half of John Butts’ *View of Cork* (1755) in which St Anne tower at Shandon appears, taller slimmer and more elevated, as do the Dutch style townhouses on the quays. As this perspective was represented later in the engraving created by Richard Watts for Charles Smith’s *The Ancient and Present State of the County and City of Cork* (1774)—a landscape illustration which folded neatly out of the book—the value of panoramic is telling, an image that offered the city up in one view, to be consumed at once by the eye.

This topographical culture invoked in its ridges, and its histories has been long folded into the typology of Cork and the language of the city’s architecture. Both the fabric of the built environment and its imagery, opens up insight into a culture that was topographically minded. A pair of Nathaniel Grogan paintings, *Boats on the River Lee below Tivoli* (1785) and *Gothic Temple Tivoli County Cork* (1785), are distinguished by the artful elaboration of views of Cork they represent. When Grogan painted his image of the Gothic Temple, now long destroyed, the principle figure in the painting was pointing towards the view, a gesture located in the body that traces the value of the picturesque in place, and in a topographical culture that haunts the city to this day.



*Nathaniel Grogan: Gothic Temple, Tivoli: Cork Children Playing', c 1785, reproduced with the kind permission of Dominic Daly.*

The settlement of the ridges from Sundays Well in the west to Tivoli in the east first by grand houses and later by the terraces and town houses of the bourgeoisie, places a deep historical and cultural investment in elevation as a mode of living and a means of expressing social status in the city.

Streets on the northern ridge are stacked above one another. Views, sight-lines and prospects orient the houses. The topographical impulses found in the individual house elements, the tall sash windows that milk light in the deepest winter, the balconies and the numerous roof lights from which to peer at the city, the river and vistas below. In the Georgian mansion Vernon Mount (1794) in Douglas, there is a remarkable testament to the depth of this culture—an oval lunette—a superb round window at the bottom of the mansion's staircase—with vistas over the estuary, down the River Lee and towards the open sea.



*'Landscape's Eye, Oval window at Vernon Mount, Cork', reproduced with kind permission of the Irish Architectural Archive.*

For it was not enough to build a villa but also to claim the view, a gift to be impressed upon guests as means to express one's civility and place in public life. In both the framing of the visible realm and in the patronage and emplacement of perspective, these windows operated in what Hannah Arendt has called 'the space of appearance,' the delicate manipulation of capital and power and place, so essential to the political negotiation of 18<sup>th</sup> century society. Through time, this culture persists. It informed the reception of the new County Hall built in the western suburbs in the late 1960s, whose title as the tallest building in the Republic of Ireland was only eclipsed by the Elysian. From the upper floors of this tower, it was claimed that people could see the source of the River Lee at Gougane Barra, the spiritual heartland of the city. In 2004, the east facing gallery windows of the Glucksmann Gallery designed by O'Donnell + Tuomey engaged comparable topographical instincts. Many of the picture windows here offer an ever changing prospect of the city that competes with the art inside, an affection for views this practice have repeated in their refurbishment of St Angela School on St Patricks Hill in 2015, itself a recognised viewing place in the city.

#### IV.

When Michael O'Flynn described The Elysian as 'a new quality landmark building which will define the Cork skyline for years to come' (Qtd. Examiner Nov 2008) and the billboards that surrounded the site declared 'a skyline defined,' he was doing more than marketing his tower, he was claiming an inheritance over the sky, prospect and views. It is in this urban culture that the Elysian makes its place. This is a speculative building of course, but one with its feet in the very fabric of the city, its topography and its eye. The building occupies an entire block. The design created by Wilson Architects is at once conventional, but also responsive in its detail. The sleek and urbane style that characterises the build seemed appointed to appeal to the aspirational ambition of the upwardly mobile residents it sought to attract. Two towers—one very tall—were appointed around a central circulation core, filled by a private podium garden elaborated with sculpture and water features. The street line on eastern side of Albert Street has been undulated, balconies recessed inwards and the building appears to lightly fold itself away from the busy traffic. The elevation on the western side of the building deploys a double height and offers a continuous open, accessible largely glass frontage. In the as yet unnamed passage between the Elysian and One Albert Quay, the architect broke the building into four distinct elements, to create a greater sense of place, the most elaborate element of which is the lesser tower, clad in deep velvet-red tiles. From here, people who pass through can glance upwards through the building, and sense trees, garden and courtyards above. More recently, in 2015, all these elements have been reflected in the black glass glazing of One Albert Quay, reflections that offer atmospheric counterpoints to the views of the rooftops of the docklands to the east and the intimacy of peeks and glimpses into the offices in the City Hall to the west.

The most striking element of the building, and the part with which it is most clearly identified, is the 17-storey tower at the southwestern corner. Perhaps, just perhaps, in this tower there are faint echoes of the triangular glass street corner found in Mies van der Rohe's proposition for a skyscraper on Friedrichstrasse in Berlin (1921), an intervention that floats in the subconscious of modernist architecture. It could be said with slightly more certainly, that a more recognisable inspiration was Frank Lloyd Wright's Golden Beacon, his prototypical skyscraper for Broadacre City (1929), a design which he manifested in the Price Tower in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. At 68.3 meters, it is the highest residential tower in the Republic of Ireland. In 2016, as the tower is prepared by its new owners—Carbon Finance, a subsidiary of the international equity firm Blackstone—for an eventual sale, its position above Cork and its place in the skyline remain central to its meaning. To some degree, the legacies of prestige and heritage invested for generations in the culture of elevation, now cascades value through the entity that owns the tower, folding capital both into the landscape and into the abstract forms of money that sustains the financial products managed by these equity funds: 'The Elysian stands like a beacon above the city' declares the tower website. 'By day it reflects the sun and sky, by night it twinkles with a myriad of lights.'<sup>iii</sup> To enhance these claims, the website puts its elevation in motion using software that provides a virtual 360 panorama of views from the tower. In doing so the current representations of the tower capture much of the intention of the many reviews of the tower in the local press. 'The stunning vistas of Cork City, from this 17-storey tower, have no peers. There are eye-popping views, to all points of the compass from the balconies—across the River

Lee, the docklands, the western suburbs, the lower harbour and thousands of houses dotted into the distance, like Lego' (Daly 31). Another, reporting on the lavish launch of the tower in 2008 by various sports stars and politicians, marvelled that '... visitors were treated to a view of the city normally only seen by crane operators or steeple jacks. The entire city boundary was in view from that height and the Garda cars far below at the rear of Anglesea Street looked like toy cars' (Healy).

However as tall as it is, this tower has been held down. The Irish American architect Louis Sullivan, who decorated his towers in Chicago with ornamental panels inspired by Celtic symbols, declared that skyscrapers should be '...every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation that from bottom to top is a unit without a single dissenting line' (Sullivan). But the Elysian does not soar, because it cannot. The topographical imperative holds it down. It is this logos of city and sky, landmarks and views, prospects and culture that occupied both the developer, the architects and the city planners, revealing the sky as a negotiated territory within which the design and orientation of the tower was managed. The land, in other words had to be written into the tower. It is for this reason, that when travelling on the overpass over the Kinsale roundabout near the southern boundary of the city, one can claim a little epiphany, for in the distance, the Elysian dips underneath the silhouette of the northern ridge. And it is for this reason, that when it came to plan the kitchens of the penthouses in the tower, the landscape arose again when the interior designer Rose McGowan chose the high gloss solid surface Parapan whose '...sharp reflective features created a fantastic feature within the penthouses where views of the city are clearly reflected back to the kitchen doors' (Bayliss 23-4).

These design imperatives have a subtle relationship in the urban landscape, in which it plays an unexpected game of hide and seek. From Penrose Quay, it moves in and out of view. From the Blackrock Road, it looms above the Victorian townhouses. When driving into the city from the Dublin road along the quays, it competes squarely with cranes on the docks as they dip into the deep cargo holds of ships, and is masked almost entirely by the monumental R & H Hall grain silo. From here, once it appears, its profile can momentarily acquire the shape of a ship. In the form that the tower took, sensitivities to the sky and the topographical are reflected in its slenderness and in the disaggregated form that defines the tower into several vertical planes. These design strategies deploy a sequence of occasional protrusions, and tapered angles that together dissolve the tower's mass and height. These animate its appearance under different conditions of shade and light. Such sensitivities to the building's situation is reflected in the synthetic granite panels that appeal to the granite facade of many of the public buildings of nineteenth-century city, whilst the bright red facade of the smaller tower, and side of the building facing west, surely evokes the old red sandstone that abounds in the city's buildings and walls, from which it is said the colours of Cork GAA jersey originates. If one felt inclined to stand and notice, the tower responds quietly to the distribution of cloud overhead and the fall of light upon the city. In contrast to the total black and reflective glass coat of the neighbouring building, One Albert Quay, which can occasionally bounce the sun's glare back into the street, the Elysian tower facilitates a more mutable relationship to the weather, the seasons, and in a more abstract sense to the geometries of earth and sun. In this scheme, the tall and continuous glass wedge that expresses most effectively the drama of the tower is key. It makes part of the building translucent. It allows extra light to enter the apartments inside. It generates panoramic views. It refracts the sun setting in the west. It makes the building glow.

Meanwhile, under guidance again from the City Council and their concerns for the skyline, the roofline of the tower is animated by small glass pavilions and patios. On the top of the tower, the plant room for the lifts is wrapped in a curved structure that in bright sunshine and when wet appears to shine in light gold. Wilson Architects completed this elaborate composition and homage to the sky with a 10-metre spire. When illuminated—in glamorous cobalt blues, hot pinks and reds, a drama in light that can extend from the top of this spire to the street—it claims to act as a landmark appear complete. These illuminations, trade enchantment and delight with other bodies of light in the city, such as the uncanny green water tower at the top of Knocknaheeny on the northern ridge and remind us that that this part of



the city is long associated with spectacle. On the site of City Hall, a large and celebrated exhibition was held in 1852 and when the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland came to open it, they named the street upon which the Elysian now sits after him. Concerts, shows, public meetings have been staged here ever since. This is a place-memory taken up in the City Hall extension designed by Ahrends Burton Koralek which includes an energetic coloured LED lighting system that lights this glass block up like fairy-art. Yet, as night falls, the eye on the street lingers on the life in the few occupied apartments in the glass walls of the Elysian, illuminated domestically, offering insight into ways of living: things inside, shadows moving about, chairs, bicycles, children's toys, a life lived enclosed, but in the open. In the sky.

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